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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 005245

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/19/2013

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN PARLIAMENT GIVES ABUL RAGHEB'S
GOVERNMENT VOTE OF CONFIDENCE, AFTER A HEATED DEBATE

Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman, per Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (U) On August 14, Jordanian Members of Parliament (MPs) overwhelmingly approved the new government of Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb. Despite this support, many MPs criticized the prime minister's cabinet and agenda during the five days of debate that preceded the vote. In the end, Abul Ragheb fired back against his opponents, primarily members of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), and, as expected, swept the vote with a significant margin. The intensity of the debate was a warning shot to the government and elite that it has not succeeded in establishing broad, popular support for reformist policy. End Summary.

Victory for Government

12. (U) Abul Ragheb's third government won an overwhelming 77.7 percent vote of confidence on August 14. 84 of 108 voting deputies (one lawmaker was absent and the House speaker, per House rules, did not vote) voted in support of the 28-member Cabinet. All 17 IAF deputies voted against the government and were thus the bulwarks of opposition. Of the 23 "nays," half were deputies representing districts in the capital, including those of the IAF. The Democratic Alliance bloc's 12 deputies, headed by former Health Minister and Amman Mayor Mamdouh Abbadi, and the 24-member National Action Front, headed by former Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali, all gave their vote of confidence. Five of the six women elected to Parliament under the new female quota system voted against the government.

Quotable Quotes

13. (C) Speeches for and against the government lasted five days, with MPs either rehashing their bloc's platform or, in the case of Islamic Action Front (IAF) members, intensifying their criticism of government policy. Many deputies accused the premier's policy statement of being a rehash of previous policies, with nothing new or solid. The majority of deputies, in what became a series of extended speeches, continued demands from days previous for services in their various constituencies. Abul Ragheb, in fact, sarcastically complained to A/S Burns August 13 that he would have to sit through 109 speeches, all of which would go overtime. We have heard others criticize the Speaker's tolerance of MPs' breaking of parliamentary rules. They attribute his attitude to the fact he will have to be re-elected as Speaker in November if he chooses to keep it.

14. (C) Of the substance addressed by MPs, desire for political and economic reform topped the list. Many members called for greater press autonomy to allow differentiation between government mouthpiece media outlets and independent voices allowed to express opposition to national policies. In terms of regional policy, the Palestinian issue topped many opposition MPs' concerns. Many, particularly IAF, MPs used their time at the podium to denounce the Quartet roadmap and called on the government to support both Palestinian and Iraqi resistance groups. Abul Ragheb told A/S Burns August 13 that the IAF only asked a few things of the government: to end the occupation of Palestine, get the Americans out of Iraq, unite the Arab world, and create a unified Muslim "umma" (or nation). The prime minister explained to A/S Burns that the IAF MPs individually are "nice and intelligent"; but, once they reached the podium, their collective condemnation of the government was propaganda for their supporters.

For the Opposition...

15. (U) Several MPs excoriated the government of PM Abul Ragheb for lacking a real program. Abdul Munem Abu Zant, a non-IAF Islamist deputy, was one of the strongest voices of opposition. He began his speech by blasting the one-person,

one vote Elections Law, which he said provoked sectarianism and tribalism, and asked about the national unity Abul Ragheb has said his government supports. In fact, challenged Abu Zant, Jordanians "have not seen a minister from a camp or a poor family." Another MP in opposition exclaimed that "authority and business don't mix, and if they do, this would turn a country into a private company... That is why in our case economic growth rate figures have only been felt by those in power not by regular folk." The MP also accused the current executive authority of dictatorship and snobbery "prompting citizens to call it a Christian Dior government." Another referred to government appointments in years past, calling them examples of "nepotism and favoritism" in many cases. "I found the shortest way to (success) is to be a relative or friend of an official," he said, adding that Abul Ragheb's policy statement was neither cohesive nor practical. Finally, an IAF MP insisted that "Islam is the solution to problems the country is currently facing and to what will come in future disasters - which will be the result of not following God's doctrines."

...and the Government

16. (U) Among those more supportive of government policy was Raji Haddad, a conservative former soldier in the Army, he went so far as to call for the reopening of political jails "for those who insult our country on satellite TV." He also urged the government to give greater authority to governors so that they could "punish offenders," asking security forces to "whip" lawbreakers even harder. More moderate in their support of the government were a host of other MPs, many of whom chose to focus on the question of national unity. Said one deputy, "some economic policy makers in the government don't know one village outside of the capital. How will they ever make sound economic decisions when they're completely ignorant of societal needs?" Another pro-government figure, Mahmoud Kharabsheh, linked his vote of confidence to the manner in which the government has been handling the Iraqi and Palestinian issues. He was critical of those MPs with "private agendas" that were failing to take into account national interests. Still others criticized the "individual declarations by fellow MPs that, regrettably, addressed some very sensitive issues in a provocative manner over these last few days."

PM Strikes Back

17. (U) After sitting and listening to parliamentarians slam his government's policies for five consecutive days, Abul Ragheb struck back before the confidence vote was to take place on August 14, giving a 20-minute speech in which he rebuffed many claims accusing him of fronting a rehash of his previous governments. The prime minister's address had strong words for the IAF: "the morals of Islam have been attacked in the name of Islam and from those that claim they work for Islam. Does Islam condone lying and falsifying facts?" This statement was a reference to what he called "misquotes" from a private meeting with IAF members during a series of meetings with different House blocs before the vote.

18. (U) The PM's speech was laden with promises to implement political and economic reforms, giving special reference to long awaited changes in the Political Parties Law. Stressing the importance of parties working within the confines of the Constitution, Abul Ragheb assured deputies that his government would put forth a new law to boost party participation in political life. But the premier, a former deputy himself, blamed parties for their own failure.

Comment

19. (C) While there was never any question that Abul Ragheb would receive a vote of confidence given Parliament's composition (i.e., a small but vocal opposition v. a sizable body of Palace loyalists), it was nonetheless interesting to watch the maneuvering of MPs on the floor. Deputies' speeches carried no real surprises, raising individual or local concerns without real debate on any major policy. As for the IAF, in marked contrast to its relatively moderate joint statement on August 10, IAF deputies' individual declarations the following day were quite critical of the government. In the end, their votes of no confidence were of no surprise and had no practical impact.

10. (C) PolOff, Pol Intern, and Pol FSN attended one of the sessions and noted a greater number of gallery observers than MPs, including the British Ambassador, who caused both bafflement and uneasy suspicion by sitting through several day-long sessions. The mood in the House was light, despite impassioned cries from the podium. MPs casually chatted with

one another and read newspapers as their colleagues took control of the floor for approximately 20 minutes each, reading prepared statements that held the interest of few other members.

11. (C) The hardest part for Abul Ragheb was not surviving the vote but having to sit through five days of verbal abuse) much of which came in the form of derisive personal attacks instead of policy concerns. (He was briefly hospitalized for exhaustion, amidst the week.) The intensity of the debate served as a reminder that the King and government have not yet cemented public support for the reform path they have followed for the past four years. Poverty and unemployment remain the daily reality of the vast majority of Jordanians, feeding political discontent and incivility. The next real test will be this Fall's budget debate, where the IMF and US-supported imperative of fiscal restraint will come up hard against deputies' calls for greater spending on social and development programs.
HALE